

Tips for Media Interviews

Why: Talk to the Media?

The media is a conduit for information about advances in cancer research to the general public as well as to other important NCI audiences—other researchers, health professionals, legislators and advocates. Every NCI contact with the media increases the public's awareness of cancer research and NCI's leadership role in cancer research. From the media's perspective, NCI scientists are authorities on cancer research. You have the ability to help journalists identify what's important about studies, put studies in the context of broader scientific research, and identify their public health implications.

When: to Contact the Press Office

- *You receive a call from a journalist.*
The press office can coordinate your call with others on the same topic or from the same reporter, provide background information, help you negotiate the terms of the interview, and notify others that the interview is taking place, when appropriate; keep a record of the call and follow up if necessary.
- *You are publishing a paper or giving a presentation that may draw media attention.*
The press office can help with background information and/or press statements, if appropriate, and field the resulting press calls.

Who: to Contact

Branch Chief (Acting):
Caroline McNeil, 2-6002

Press officer on duty:
301-496-6641

- Dorie Hightower
- Peggy Vaughn

Divisional liaisons:

CCR: Jennifer Michalowski, 2-6102

DCB: Mike Miller, 2-6153

DCCPS: Nicole Gottlieb, 6-0479

DCEG: Nancy Nelson, 2-0004

DCP: Lynn Cave, 2-0912
Mike Miller, 2-6153

DCTD: Lynn Cave, 2-0912
Caroline McNeil, 2-6002

Crafting messages

Messages are short, simple, compelling statements that capture the essence of the research findings you are communicating. When effectively communicated, messages are what the audience is likely to remember. Your messages should explain the significance of findings and put them into context for the audience.

Reporters work on tight deadlines and may bypass the normal channel of going through the press office and contact you directly.

When that happens, refer the call to the NCI press officer, who will find out the reporter's deadline, subject matter and kinds of questions the reporter wants to ask. The press officer will coordinate an interview time with you to allow you time to prepare your response and jot down key points.

In preparing your talking points, always think about the members of the public whom you are trying to reach. What do they know and how can you make the information understandable from their perspective? Remember to identify any difficult issues in advance and plan your responses. Know what you can and cannot discuss.

Preparing for the interview

Getting ready for an interview starts with considering the situation and audience. The media differs in its characteristics and needs. Is the reporter a science reporter from a general-audience newspaper like *The Washington Post*, a general interest reporter from a consumer magazine like *Ladies Home Journal* or a science writer from a trade or professional publication like *Oncology Times*? Think of the reporter as the conduit to that particular audience. *The NCI press office can provide background on the media organization and audience, as well as the substance, format, and approximate length of the interview, and it will also ensure that the reporter has received appropriate background material prior to your interview.*

Helpful hints for getting your messages across:

- Lead with your most important message, and let the reporter know when you are about to talk about an important piece of the story. You can alert them to key points with phrases like, "Let me underscore...," "The important thing is...," "What I'd really like you to remember...," or "In conclusion..."

- Make your point and then illustrate it. Support your messages with well-chosen data, anecdotes and analogies.
- Think of the reporter's questions as topics—don't feel compelled to answer each question within a narrow scope.
- Restate your messages in different ways to increase the chance that at least one variation will be in the finished, edited story.
- Be concise. Edit yourself rather than be edited. Keep in mind that "less is more."

General interview tips:

- Never say, "No comment," and leave it at that. Explain to the reporter why you can't answer the question. Perhaps it isn't your area of expertise or you don't have all the data. Whenever possible, follow that explanation with information you can talk about. If you don't know an answer, say so, and, whenever possible, find out and follow up.
- If you need time to think, take the time. A pause will be edited if you're being recorded and it is far more important to think before speaking than simply to fill up the tape.

Off the record vs. on background

Never go "off the record." If you don't want to see it in print or hear it repeated, don't say it. Background interviews need clear ground rules—ahead of time. If you don't want to be quoted, but you do want the information reported, you can offer the information "on background" if you and the reporter agree that the information you provide will not be attributed to you.

Beware of negative statements

Never repeat a question and don't get defensive. Redirect the question and respond in the most positive way possible. Use a transitional phrase such as, "Not at all; our organization strives to...," "On the contrary...," or "That's inaccurate; the real facts are...". Repeating a negative question allows reporters to put words in your mouth.

Example: A reporter asks, "Does this mean the study was poorly designed?"

Wrong answer: "The study was not poorly designed. However, more research is needed to explore..."

Correct answer: "Not at all, but more research is needed..."

Infamous examples of a response to a negative question include President Nixon's saying, "I am not a crook," and President Clinton's saying, "I did not have sex with that woman..."

General interview tips (continued):

- Avoid speculating. Reporters will often ask you "what if" questions. You can simply say, "That information will need more research."
- Do not say more than is necessary. When you have answered a question, stop talking and let the reporter make the next move.
- Steer clear of policy issues. "Based on this new data, would you ban cigarettes in the U.S.?" A good answer might be, "Our job is to do the research. Other agencies set policy."
- Refer to the National Cancer Institute (not the acronym NCI) and, if relevant, the name of the project or study.

Newspaper or magazine interviews:

- Lead with your most important message and do not bury important points in long answers. Remember to conclude the interview with your most important point as well.
- If you're doing an interview over the phone, try standing up while you're being interviewed. Even though a reporter can't see you, the energy generated by standing up and gesturing comes through in your voice.
- Speak slowly if the reporter is trying to take notes. Do not be surprised if the reporter is recording the interview.
- Print articles cover topics in more depth than broadcast interviews, and you may be one of several experts interviewed. Usually these interviews are conducted by phone, and you can limit them to 10 to 20 minutes. Know what your role is in the context of the entire article and ask who else is being interviewed so that you are prepared for contradictory or controversial comments from another party.
- Print journalism can accommodate statistics more easily than broadcast media so do not hesitate to use numbers to illustrate the story. Offer to provide graphics, charts, photographs or other information that will help tell the story—the Press Office can assist you with this important follow-up. If statistics are used, offer to have your experts review the data before the story goes to print.

Radio interviews:

- If the interview is taped, ask the producer to let you know when the taping begins. If the interview is live, make sure you know when you are on the air.

- It is especially important to repeat important points in a radio interview since listeners are often distracted by doing other activities such as driving or doing the dishes.
- Radio stations rarely have reporters trained in science or medicine. If a reporter is not asking questions that get to the heart of the research, take the lead in providing key information. Be prepared to summarize your message in about 30 seconds.

Television interviews:

- How you look and sound will help you get your message across. Keep your energy level up, and remember not to wear accessories such as flashy jewelry or ties, which can distract viewers.
- When you are on camera or being recorded, remember to repeat your messages. Unless you are on a live talk show, the producer will excerpt short “sound bites” from your interview, and the more you integrate your messages into the interview, the greater the possibility that they will be used.
- If you are seated for an interview, sit up straight and lean slightly forward. Avoid crossing your legs, which causes you to sit back into the chair. Avoid sitting in a chair that swivels—the movements can be distracting.

Dealing with special situations

Some situations fall outside routine media relations. When you have doubts or concerns, do not hesitate to call the NCI press office. Always call when a subject is controversial, external partners are involved, the research is slated for public release at a later date, or the extent of public discussion is guided by legal considerations. We can coordinate with the NIH and DHHS press offices. And we can assist you in fine-tuning your messages and preparing any helpful background materials.

Please contact the press office when a journalist calls you for an interview. We would also like to know about any development or publication in your field that is likely to generate media attention or controversy. We can provide any essential background materials, make arrangements with film crews, and provide other logistical support for your interviews.

Supporting your work with the media is the press office's mission. We can provide you with a more detailed media-training handbook as well as obtain for you more intensive training with a professional media trainer.

You can reach us:

Phone: **301-496-6641** or
E-mail: **ncipressofficers@mail.nih.gov**

